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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000712

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SUBJECT: CAMEROON: DISCUSSION WITH BIYA'S CHIEF OF STAFF

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary: On July 10, Pol/Econ Chief met with President Paul Biya's Director of Civil Cabinet (Chief of Staff) Jean-Baptiste Beleoken, who is in charge of managing the president's private affairs, protocol, and scheduling. Beleoken was focused on economics and said that this would be the President's focus if Bakassi remains calm. He conceded corruption was rampant but reaffirmed Biya's commitment to tackling it. Biya would probably attend the UNGA and was recently in Switzerland for health check-ups, he said. End summary.

The Economy

¶2. (C) Beleoken was keenly focused on the economy, including plans to build a deep water port at Kribi and Limbe. He hoped the U.S. would help revive Cameroon's moribund airline sector. He complained that there were too many nonperformers in the Cabinet, alluding to rumors of a Cabinet shuffle (we've heard these rumors for many months) and suggesting that a shuffle come as part of the President's effort to revamp the economy. He also suggested that the President's recent decision to postpone the creation of Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) was related to the timing of a possible ministerial shake-up. He opined that the President moves "slowly, but in the right direction".

Bakassi

¶3. (C) Beleoken also depicted the Bakassi situation in economic terms, saying that now that the Bakassi dispute was resolved, Biya could afford to focus on the economy. This focus was dependent on stability in Bakassi, he added. Cameroon was counting on the United States to help with security on the Peninsula. Peace and stability were essential, he said, expressing appreciation for General Ward's 2007 visit with President Biya. He hoped for increased focus on Gulf of Guinea maritime security.

Corruption

¶4. (C) Pol/Econ Chief outlined our active maritime domain cooperation and reinforced the priority need to focus on economic growth and the investment climate. Pol/Econ Chief said addressing governance issues would be key. Beleoken hoped the USG did not doubt the will of the President to fight corruption. He conceded that if the President were more aggressive on corruption "he would have to fire the whole Cabinet". He blamed corruption on foreigners; Cameroonians were not so corrupt in the old days, he said.

15. (C) Pol/Econ Chief told him we believe Biya has the will to fight corruption and appreciate recent high level corruption-related arrests; however, there remain major challenges and we have concerns about the lack of coordination among GRC anti-corruption efforts, especially between the Minister of Justice and ANIF.

Biya's Travels: UNGA and Otherwise

16. (C) President Biya "probably" will go to the UNGA in the Fall because it will be the last such meeting for President Bush. Biya plans to travel to Bakassi and Darak after the rainy season (Decemberish). When asked about Biya's recent trip to Switzerland, Beleoken said it was not a vacation but a chance for the President to do medical check-ups. (In response to a request to meet the visiting President of U.S. energy company AES, Beleoken said the President will do it if he is in town and not ill).

Comment

17. (C) Beleoken was eager to open up on a wide range of topics, making a point at the end to say that it was important for diplomats to have as much information about the reality of Cameroon as possible. His candor and willingness to engage at length is unlike others in the presidency, who can be elliptical and guarded. Beleoken is well informed and in a position to speak with authority about the president's

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thinking on issues. His focus on economics is mirrored by the Prime Minister's plans to lead a high-level delegation to the AGOA Forum. Other contacts in the presidency also seem to want to talk about the economy these days. While the interest is well-placed, so far the GRC has lacked the vision or implementation skills to jump-start greater economic growth. If Biya's planned trip to Bakassi takes place, it should help demonstrate GRC commitment to stability and development in the area. The highest level GRC official to visit Bakassi has been the Minister of Youth; Biya has not traveled in-country outside of Central and South Provinces since 2004.

GARVEY